

# The Pashtun Tribe

Tribes have existed for millennia in the area that is present-day Afghanistan. They emerged over centuries in various sections of the country, taking form along extended kinship lines. Led by councils of elders, tribes provided their members with protection, financial support, a means to resolve disputes, and punishment of those who had committed crimes or broken tribal codes of conduct.

For Pashtuns, the country's largest ethnic group and the Taliban's primary source of support, tribes are particularly important. Successfully turning Pashtun tribes against the Taliban — or perhaps families or sub-tribes if they deal with the government on their own — could deliver a serious blow to the insurgency and potentially create a means of stabilizing the long-suffering country.

However some Afghans see the tribes as inherently anachronistic, sexist and corrupt — a system that further undermines the already extraordinarily difficult task of creating multiethnic, merit-based national institutions. They warn that the country would be thrown into the hands of myriad tribal militias that the central government could never control. A warning that has some basis in the experience following the Soviet withdrawal.

## Pashtun heartland

The largest and traditionally most politically powerful ethnic group, the Pashtun (or Pakhtun in northern Pakhtu dialects), is composed of many people (an estimated 10.1 million in 1995). The most numerous sub-groups being the Durrani and the Ghilzai. Like a number of other Afghan ethnic groups, the Pushtun extend beyond Afghanistan into Pakistan where they constitute a major ethnic group of about 14 million.

The Afghan Pashtun heartland roughly covers a large crescent-shaped belt following the Afghan-Pakistani border on the east, southward from Nuristan, across the south, and northward along the Iranian border almost to Herat. Enclaves of Pashtun also live scattered among other ethnic groups throughout the nation, where they have settled at various times since the end of the nineteenth century as shifts in populations occurred in response to political expediency and economic opportunities.

## Language & Culture

The Pashtun speak several mutually intelligible dialects of Pashtu; some also speak Dari. Both Pashtu and Dari belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. Pashtun are generally Hanafi Sunni Muslims, but some are Ithna Asharia Shia.

Pashtun culture rests on [Pushtunwali](#), a legal and moral code that determines social order and responsibilities. It contains sets of values pertaining to honor (namuz), solidarity (nang), hospitality, mutual support, shame and revenge which determines social order and individual responsibility. The defence of namuz, even unto death, is practically obligatory for every Pashtun. Elements in this code of behavior are often in opposition to the Shariah. Much of the resistance to the largely detribalized leadership of the DRA stemmed from the perception that in attempting to nationalize land and wealth, as well as regulate marriage practices, the DRA was unlawfully violating the prescriptions of

[Pushtunwali](#).

## History

The Pashtun have provided the central leadership for Afghanistan since the eighteenth century when Ahmad Khan Abdali of Kandahar established the Durrani Empire. This one-time general in Nadir Shah's Persian army was elected to power in 1747 at a tribal jirgah, an assembly which takes decisions by consensus. The legitimacy of his rule was sanctioned at the same time by the ulama (religious scholars). Ahmad Khan assumed the title of Durr-i-Durran (Pearl of Pearls) and was henceforth known as Ahmad Shah Durrani and his tribe, the Pashtun Abdali tribe, as the Durrani. When his successors lost the support of the tribes after Ahmad Shah's death in 1772, control passed to the Mohammadzai lineage within the Barakzai section of the Durrani Pushtun.

Mohammadzai dominance continued from 1826 to 1978, interrupted only for a scant nine months in 1929. Then power shifted to the second largest Pashtun tribe, the Ghilzai, who dominated the leadership of the secular Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) after 1978, although most were essentially detribalized because of their close association with urban life. This regime was in turn replaced in 1992 by the Islamic State of Afghanistan, established by the mujahadeen whose leaders were mostly from the Ghilzai, and a variety of eastern Pashtun tribes, although the President from 1992-1996 was a Tajik.

Once the Soviets left — and in turn the Americans — mujahadeen commanders turned on each other and the Taliban emerged as a force that, though repressive, at least provided law and order. The Taliban emphasized Islam as the organising principle for society and government, not tribes. Across the country, little-known Muslim clerics ran government ministries, provinces and cities. Tribal elders were again ignored.

Since being toppled in 2001, the Taliban have mercilessly targeted tribal elders who support the Karzai government, apparently viewing them as one of their greatest potential rivals. At the same time, President Karzai's weak government has struggled to protect and strengthen tribal elders, hundreds of whom have been killed in assassinations and bomb attacks.

## Occupations

The Pashtun are basically farmers or herdsmen, or combinations of both, although several groups are renowned for specialized occupations. For instance, the monarchy and many government bureaucrats were Durrani Pashtun, the Ahmadzai Ghilzai are consulted for their legal abilities, the Andar Ghilzai specialize in constructing and repairing underground irrigation systems called karez, and the Shinwari of Paktya monopolize the lumber trade.

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